

Task Force Professional leads the way in executing

2nd Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment provides

By Sharon McBride, Editor-in-Chief

With the official adoption of the Army Capstone Concept in December 2009, the U.S. Army officially embraced the concepts of 'mission command' and 'combined arms maneuver.'

According to the ACC, the term mission command is now preferred over command and control. At its essence it's decentralized concept which enables agile and adaptive leaders to execute disciplined initiative within the commander's intent as part of unified action in a complex and ambiguous environment. Combined arms maneuver is defined as the application of the elements of combat power in a complementary and reinforcing manner to achieve physical, temporal, or psychological advantages over the enemy, preserve freedom of action, and exploit success.

With the outlining of these concepts in the ACC, the stage has been set for the Army of 2016-2028, however, the 2nd Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment which was part of the 82nd Airborne's Task Force Fury (4-82nd Airborne Brigade Combat Team) forming Task Force Professional, recognized the need for an early transformation in how they conducted their mission to Afghanistan last year.

The unit was assigned an 'in-lieu' mission in three northwestern provinces, Badghis and Herat. The airborne Fires battalion was transformed into a COIN Task Force that included a rifle company, cavalry troop, two additional rifle platoons and a platoon of 120 mm and 81 mm mortars. Historically, this part of Afghanistan has been relatively safe. But insurgent groups have emerged there in the past couple of years. They terrorized locals with illegal checkpoints, demanding food, money and other support, said Lt. Col. William Huff, battalion commander of Task Force Professional. Additionally, the combined threats to the population included corrupt contractors who failed to deliver services and local government officials not

connected with the concerns of the local population.

There, Task Force Professional partnered with Afghan Security forces, along with NATO soldiers and U.S. Marine Special Forces elements. The task force worked for year trying to secure the underdeveloped and previously Taliban governed provinces. These areas were also severely compromised

is to keep it simple.

"I started crafting my intent early, and tested it prior to our deployment at the Joint Readiness Training Center (Fort Polk, La.). I found keeping it simple allowed understanding throughout the unit," he said.

Huff said he distilled down his intent, which was nested with LT GEN David M. Rodriguez's, to three basic concepts; these

were: protect and respect the population; *Shohna ba Shohna* – a Dari expression which means 'shoulder to shoulder,' or team always with their Afghan Security Force partners; and fear in the enemy. Rodriguez is the commander, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command & Deputy Commander, United States Forces – Afghanistan.

"These simple criteria drove all our decision making processes," Huff said. "If my guys could answer 'yes' to all these questions, then they were operating within my intent."

Huff said another key to success was he also had very few standing orders, which allowed his paratroopers to develop situational understanding rapidly and to seize, retain and

exploit the initiative under a broad range of conditions.

"I did have one and that was to never break contact with the enemy – never," Huff said. "We never ran away from a fight. Not because lethal actions alone will prevail, but because the local population was observing to see who was committed to their protection. Returning to the FOB and claiming victory in a skirmish was not considered 'victory' in the eyes of the Afghan population."

Because of this determination and simplicity in intent, the insurgent element in the unit's operating area nick named Task Force Professional "the flood."

"The enemy knew when the U.S. paratroopers and our Afghan brothers came around it was like a 'flood,'" Huff said.

The term "flood" has a lot of meaning to Afghans, he said. "It meant essentially they could not stop us."

The concept of operating like a "flood" was then taken a step further, once again borrowing from analogies that are typical in



A U.S. Forces Afghanistan cultural advisor offers his condolences to a villager whose family members were killed during an operation targeting insurgents near Herat province, Feb. 17, 2009. (Photo by Lt. Cmdr. John Gay, Department of Defense USN)

due to the only economic opportunity for the people living in area was a poppy route that runs through the valley and finances counter insurgency.

Although, considered relatively new processes, mission command and combined arms maneuver, were at the essence of everything the unit practiced during the deployment, said Huff.

Huff, and key members of his team, was on hand recently at Fort Sill, Okla. to speak about lessons learned about their deployment to a very pretentious area with a high security threat.

Keep it simple. At its core, mission command, means operating in a decentralized manner and within the commander's intent, Huff said. It means taking decision making power and assignment of accountability for results and pushing those responsibilities down to the individual leader and the unit at lower echelons. According to Huff, the best way to make sure the commander's intent is interpreted correctly

'wide area security' and 'combined arms maneuver' lessons learned from Afghanistan



LTC William Huff, battalion commander of Task Force Professional, receives calls from both military and local government officials during 2nd Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment's 2010 deployment to Afghanistan, expressing their support for lethal fires when required. (Photo courtesy of 321st FAR)

nature, Huff said.

Theswarm. I adopted the term “swarming” to explain what our contact with the enemy should look like—both lethal and non-lethal. The analogy and concept we adopted is similar to how fire ants have a decentralized reaction to a perceived enemy, Huff said.

“The fire ant scout does not call back to the main nest and ask, ‘May I attack?’” Huff said. “He understands the intent and attacks. He sends little pulse out and everyone else swarms to him.

“For us, swarming meant maintaining persistent mobile reconnaissance and security patrols which allowed friendly forces not only to dominate key terrain and deter threat action, but also to produce a positive psychological effect.

“We attempted to swarm with contact non-lethal, and when required, lethal actions. It was essential to keep the tempo high in order to operate faster than the insurgents,” Huff said. “Reporting indicated that local population and insurgency estimates of our combat power were five times greater than what we actually had,” he said.

By incorporating “swarming” into mission operations it not only degraded enemy effectiveness but produced effective combined arms maneuver, allowing Task Force Professional to achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages over the enemy, preserve freedom of action, and exploited success.

As a result, the traditional smuggling and criminal element cross border coordination particularly between the Northern Herat Districts and Badghis were severely compromised, Huff said.

More than three cups. Key leader engagements were also essential to their mission success in Afghanistan, Huff said.

“SSG Joshua Thomas, as a platoon sergeant partnered with the Badghis province Police Quick Reaction Force did everything in support of the provincial governor or provincial police chief,” Huff said. As a result he was constantly out and about, because the QRF often operated 100 kilometers from the nearest mutually supporting element and with limited communications.

“I spent the majority of my time with Afghans rather than my own guys,” Thomas said. Because of terrain and technology issues, Thomas said he really no choice but to function decentralized.

He also said that is the way the Afghan National Army is used to operating and for them it was “business as usual.”

Learning how the Afghan National Army worked was also a key to the unit’s success.

“Building key leader engagement by drinking three cups of tea is a misnomer,” said CPT Zack Tegtmeier, who commanded a COIN team, which consisted of two rifle platoons, two transformed howitzer platoons and a mortar section. The team operated in a once-Taliban dominated hub of Bala Murghab in northern Badghis.

“It’s more like 5,000 cups of tea, while working with the district governor, district police, NDS, the ANA, and an Italian battle group,” he said.

Time and proximity are the

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only ways to gain the information and intelligence needed to accomplish the mission, emphasized Thomas and Tegtmeier.

KLEs were vital to fostering an environment of mutual respect and trust with Afghan counterparts, Tegtmeier added.

It also aided in learning the local challenges, and facilitated the understanding of the provincial government’s goals. All leaders of Task Force Professional stressed the importance to not always talk about business with the ANSF but rather utilize influencing techniques to develop a bond and augment rapport, which in turn, will increase the cooperation and execution of operations on both sides.

In a permissive humanitarian environment, the art of communicating can either make or break you, he said. Procrastination—either deliberate or because the leadership gets caught in the military decision making process or risk assessments—can also be problematic.

When conducting missions with the ANSF, it’s better if every decision is followed by action, Thomas added.

“You can’t say give me 72 hours and I’ll work up a contingency operation when there’s a problem—it doesn’t work that way—you lose face. The QRF needed to operate as fast or faster than the insurgents, and the traditional U.S. operational process is simply too slow,” Thomas said.

Live, eat breathe. Another sustain that made the difference was the combined teams were also truly embedded with their ANSF partners. Living, sleeping, eating and conducting all operations together are

a must, Huff said. This allowed for shared understanding and immediate decision making.

“This trust and interdependency extended beyond the U.S. and Afghanistan National Security Forces relationship into the ANSF combined relationship,” Huff said.

Varying levels of success were achieved by area but after the deployment was over, the secured area had increased considerably in each of the provinces and the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, supported by National Directorate of Security, were able to conduct routine, deliberate and hasty operations with confidence in their ANSF sister services.

“Living permanently among the populace, as opposed to isolating ourselves in COP/FOB with physical standoff, allowed us to truly secure the population, prevent INS from influencing the people, develop positive relationships between the populace and ANSF through proximity, and truly gauge the populace’s perception of the ANSF and government,” Huff said.

TF Pro also deliberately refrained from conducting threat-focused offensive operations without valid specific intelligence, as these types of operations more often distance the population from the government and security forces with little tactical success.

Operations instead were prioritized for development and security of the population; building a positive relationship with the population and ensuring their security marginalized the insurgents by denying them safe haven and reducing the effects of their propaganda, Huff said.

“The key Afghan leaders who we supported understood the importance of non-lethal action and population security; however, there were a population of mid-level commanders and staff who only wanted to conduct lethal operations and return to their FOB. It was a habit they learned from the Americans and ISAF over the last several years,” Huff said.

Trust technology but verify. “Mission command is not about what technology you have... it’s a mindset,” Huff said. “I think the true test came for us when some of our elements were forced to operate with limited communications due to various conditions, and were also required to act without approval from higher.”

“We never let our lack of communication hinder our decisiveness—down to the lowest level. I never wanted these guys to be paralyzed because the ‘boss’ wasn’t around to tell them what to do.”

It’s imperative not to depend on technology,



CPT Dennis Williams, Task Force Professional team commander, plans with partners, from the Afghan National Army, Border Police, National Police, and the National Directorate of Security future population security operations during the unit's 2010 deployment. (Photo courtesy of 321st FAR)

Huff explained.

"There's a difference in mission command and net centric warfare. Net centric warfare, I believe, is too associated with technology – technology can fail," Huff said. "If you got it, it should increase your situational awareness but not dictate it."

Practice courage and responsibility. "Courage in the face of danger is what we ask our Soldiers to do every day," Huff said. Leaders at all levels must demonstrate courage and personal responsibility along with the decentralized concept of mission command.

"If this is not practiced it limits mission command," Huff said.

So along these lines, Task Force Professional as a whole tried not to get wrapped up in formal and distinct risk assessments, Huff explained.

"It doesn't mean, you're flippant, cavalier or a maverick – not at all," Huff said. "We emphasized probabilities vs. possibilities. This is a principle dating back centuries, but is sometimes ignored. We found wasting limited time on possibilities was not positive."

But in Afghanistan, the time it can take to map out a formal and analytic risk assessment prior to action can cause failure of the mission.

"As long as my troops were acting within my intent, we were succeeding and we assumed risk as necessary," Huff said. "The

decisions were assessed based on results and not on what might have happened. In warfare, results matter, it is not an academic exercise."

Key points achieved. Economic development tripled the region. Production at local coal mine more than tripled after operations and security increased, Huff said.

"Establishing security allowed workers who had fled the area to return to the mine in Zapzak Pass; also, cargo trucks were much more capable and willing to transport the coal (and any other goods) to Herat with the new greatly diminished threat along their main highway," Huff said.

Prior to deployment, the ANA in the operating area had never trained for or conducted any night operations. Multiple night rehearsals built confidence in the ANA PLT, shaping them into a much more effective reconnaissance force by allowing them to achieve true tactical stealth and surprise through effective night movement.

Task Force Professional also used local solutions to fix problems rather than relying on the traditional solutions. For example, the addition of motorcycles for transportation allowed freedom of movement throughout the AO.

"Motorcycle reconnaissance allowed the ANSF to match and even exceed the insurgent normal mobility advantage," Huff said.

With the use of motorcycles, ABP scouts were able to rapidly deploy to key terrain to confirm/deny (and ultimately deter) any threat activity, he said.

Controlled swarming was coordinated through a partnered ABP/ANA/US C2 node, from which the Afghan Border Police recon officer directed movement via handheld radio. This unparalleled mobility advantage neutralized the threat and ensured successful decisive operations.

Required mindset. According to the ACC, operational adaptability requires a mindset based on flexibility of thought calling for leaders at all levels who are comfortable with collaborative planning and decentralized execution, have a tolerance for ambiguity, and possess the ability and willingness to make rapid adjustments to the situation. This ability is essential to seizing, retaining and exploited the initiative under a broad range of conditions.

2nd Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment which was part of the 82nd Airborne's Task Force Professional Fury and the 4th Brigade Combat Team defined this mindset as they started in a small area, secured the population, and then as NATO's presence expanded so did security in the area.

2nd Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment (Task Force Professional) came home in September 2010.